

The Park and the People



A HISTORY OF *Central Park*

"ORIGINAL AND PROVOCATIVE . . .

A DEEPLY FELT CELEBRATION OF THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SPACE."

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

Roy Rosenzweig & Elizabeth Blackmar

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INTRODUCTION

In 1890 Eugene Schieffelin, a member of an old and wealthy New York family, released eighty starlings in Central Park, so New Yorkers could see the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays. Today, their 200 million descendants fill the skies across America. The influence of Central Park similarly spans the country. Thousands of municipal parks are direct descendants of this first landscaped public park in the United States. Its organization, policing arrangements, rules for use, and especially its design have been a powerful model (and sometimes countermodel). Central Park, one popular architectural guide concludes, is "the granddaddy of America's naturally landscaped parks."¹

Central Park has been, in addition, a symbol of our national culture. In its first decade, the 1860s, the lithographs of Currier and Ives displayed to a national audience elegant New Yorkers riding in their carriages and strolling on the paths. In 1879 the democratic poet Walt Whitman noted the "rich, interminable circus" of the carriage parade "of New York's wealth and 'gentility'" in the park.² A century later it appears in films as a place of sophisticated urbanity. Woody Allen's cerebral New Yorkers ponder the meaning of life as they negotiate its walks in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. The "yuppies" of the 1980s in *When Harry Met Sally* sip drinks at the boathouse cafe. In *Wall Street* a young stockbroker confronts a ruthless inside trader on the Sheep Meadow.

But Central Park is also a place where crowds of ordinary New Yorkers gather and play. In the 1890s William Dean Howells marveled at the "spectacle" of the immigrants who jostled on the Mall as they took in "this domain of theirs." A half century later, the musical *Up in Central Park* celebrated the park as the common possession of all New Yorkers—"the big back yard of the city," a place "to laugh, to dream, to love, to roam." In the movie musical *Hair*,

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dreamers in long hair and Day-Glo clothing roam there. In E. B. White's 1945 children's book *Stuart Little*, no one thinks it odd to cheer a mouse to victory in a model-boat race on the Conservatory Water.³

Central Park has been envisioned as a place of romance and of destiny as well. In Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country*, Undine Spragg seeks out an assignation in the wisteria arbor. Robert Nathan's Eben Adams finds love with a young woman from the past on the Mall and the Lake in *Portrait of Jennie*. In a more sultry key, Billie Holiday sang about "lovers that bless the dark on benches in Central Park." J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield watches his sister Phoebe reach for the golden ring on the Carousel. In Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Neighbors," an old man glimpses death in the winter in the park: "The desolate park became a cemetery. The buildings on Central Park South towered like headstones."⁴

Central Park has also powerfully symbolized the redeeming power of nature. In George Loring Brown's 1862 canvas, people are barely visible amid the serene greens and browns of the trees and grass. In the postimpressionist Maurice Prendergast's turn-of-the-century paintings of May Day, the people seem to turn into flowers. W. B. Van Ingen's landscapes have no people at all, only nature. Marianne Moore saw the park through its seasons: "Spring: masses of bloom, white and pink cherry blossoms on trees given us by Japan. Summer: fragrance of black locust and yellow-wood flowers. Autumn: a leaf rustles. Winter: one catches sight of a skater, arms folded, leaning to the wind—the very symbol of peaceful solitude, unimpaired freedom. We talk of peace. This is it."⁵

For all the celebrations of the park's pastoral attractions, perhaps the most compelling image for artists and writers has been the juxtaposition of the city and nature, of New York and Central Park. Photographers have been fascinated by the contrast offered by steel and glass office towers and art deco apartments looming over trees and lakes. Reversing the perspective, Ruth Orkin captures the park from the heights of those same buildings. Other images counterpose the charms of nature to the city's dangers. As early as the 1880s the plot of *The Mystery of Central Park* revolved around a murder in the park, though only two or three murders occurred in the park's first thirty years. In the 1960s Johnny Carson joked about the danger: "It was so quiet in Central Park last night. You could have heard a knife drop." The poet Robert Lowell invoked the fears of violence:

We beg delinquents for our life.
Behind each bush, perhaps a knife;
each landscaped crag, each flowering shrub,
hides a policeman with a club.⁶

Whether in the form of a one-liner or a poem, these stark hints of urban

danger in a pastoral setting have unfairly exaggerated the threat of crime in Central Park. Yet they do remind us that America's most important naturally landscaped park is an *urban* space, best understood in relation to its city. That reminder is particularly important since most nonfiction about Central Park (as distinguished from imaginative representations) has tended to view it as isolated from city life and conflicts, as a landscape of vistas, birds, bridges, buildings, rocks, and trees. Few have written of the *people* who made, maintained, and above all, enjoyed the park that was their own.

Historians have shared the tendency to study this public space apart from the city's people. No full-scale history has been published; most historians concentrate instead on the career and the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed the park with Calvert Vaux in 1858. The two envisioned it as a pastoral retreat from the pressures and aesthetic monotony of a growing city, and historians and landscape architects have seen it reflected in their eyes, as a work of landscape art.⁷

To be sure, it is impossible to comprehend Central Park fully without understanding its appeal as a designed natural landscape, and we have benefited enormously from the work of those who have explored these dimensions of the park. Nevertheless, our goal in this book is to offer a different perspective on the park's history—one that puts people at the center and relates the park to the city. We tell the story of the park's people—the merchants and uptown landowners who launched the project; the immigrant and black residents who lived on the land seized for the park; the politicians, gentlemen, and artists who disputed its design and operation; the German gardeners, Irish laborers, and Yankee engineers who actually built it; and the generations of New Yorkers for whom Central Park was their only backyard.

We begin this history of Central Park as a social institution and space, an aspect of the city rather than just a natural or designed landscape, by asking a seemingly easy question: What is a "public park"? In its broadest terms, this book is an exploration of the changing meanings New Yorkers have attached to that deceptively simple phrase.

Parks have evolved over the centuries in concept and in form. In medieval and early modern England, a *park* was "an enclosed tract of land held by royal grant or prescription for keeping beasts of the chase," usually deer. More and more of these parks were created in the sixteenth century as English aristocrats and gentry cleared and enclosed large tracts of land around country estates, taking over entire villages and common fields. Eighteenth-century landlords continued what cultural critic Raymond Williams characterizes as the "imposition and theft" of the English enclosure movement, but instead of mere private hunting preserves, these new parks were often artificially constructed scenic landscapes. With the assistance of landscape gardeners such as Humphrey Repton and Lancelot ("Capability") Brown, landlords created "the view, the ordered proprietary repose, the prospect," Williams writes, "a rural landscape

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emptied of rural labour and labourers; a sylvan and watery prospect, with a hundred analogies in neo-pastoral painting and poetry, from which the facts of production had been banished.”⁸

Paradoxically, then, these carefully crafted English landscapes were intended to mimic or improve nature, to present idealized nature so arranged as to disguise human intervention. And since this work “was centered upon the great expanse of land and woods that in the typical large country place was simply called the Park,” historian Norman Newton writes, the word *park* came to be attached to an artificially natural landscape. English travelers readily extended this usage to the royal and aristocratic grounds of the Continent, where landscape gardeners arranged nature in a more formal style.⁹

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, parks increasingly became identified with cities. German towns turned old fortifications into public gardens. The London public had been admitted, with regulations, to royal grounds such as Hyde Park as early as the seventeenth century, and over the next two centuries other royal lands were opened to public use. By the early nineteenth century municipal and national governments had begun to establish and landscape public parks that represented the romantic ideal of *rus in urbe*—country in the city.

Alongside this formal strand of park development, there has long existed a vernacular concept of public open space, whose tradition is more difficult to document. The cultural geographer J. B. Jackson contrasts “two types of park land”: the “‘designed’ parks” produced by landscape gardeners and “‘unstructured’ playgrounds,” where, at least until the late nineteenth century, “the common people and particularly adolescents, could exercise and play and enjoy themselves, and at the same time participate in community life.” Jackson finds evidence of these unstructured “parks” in the churchyards of medieval Europe, in the stretches of undeveloped land outside the city walls or along riverbanks (what the French call *terrains vagues*), and in the “grove out in the country near the river.”¹⁰

The dual heritage of designed and vernacular public spaces shaped the development of urban parks in the United States. One strand of the vernacular tradition stretches back to the New England commons—spaces held by the community for shared utilitarian purposes (for example, grazing cattle or gathering fuel) as well for public assemblies, particularly militia drills. New York’s own Common served a variety of purposes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—pasture for cattle, the setting for executions, the home of the almshouse and jail, and the site of public festivals and protests. But only in 1797, five years after it was enclosed for the first time, was it labeled “The Park” (rather than “The Fields” or “The Common”) on a city map. And the designation “City Hall Park” or “The Park” came into wide use only in the first decade of the nineteenth century when it was landscaped in connection with the construction of City Hall.¹¹

Another vernacular strand derives from the early nineteenth-century com-

mercial proprietors who opened private parks such as New York's Vauxhall Gardens, modeled on pleasure gardens in London. More elusive to historical recovery and less structured in their composition were the innumerable open spaces appropriated by youths and adults for sports and games—for example, along the Manhattan waterfront or in vacant lots uptown. On the cusp of the vernacular and formal park traditions in the United States stood “rural” cemeteries landscaped in the English romantic style. In the 1830s and 1840s Cambridge's Mount Auburn, Philadelphia's Laurel Hill, and Brooklyn's Greenwood cemeteries helped to foster a taste for pastoral landscapes and a habit of “country” picnics and excursions within the city.

When New Yorkers created Central Park in the 1850s, they turned to formal landscaped European parks for their model rather than to vernacular traditions—but not without opposition. Even before the city acquired land for a park New Yorkers began to debate how this new public institution should be defined.

Frederick Law Olmsted, who was the park's first superintendent, said that the public would have to be “trained” to use a park “properly so-called,” by which he meant a pastoral landscape in the English tradition. But what *was* a “proper” park? New Yorkers repeatedly proposed to alter Central Park's natural design—for example, by adding ornamental gates, formal gardens, or baseball diamonds with spectator stands. Parkgoers created their own paths (“desire lines,” as landscape architects call them) and turned meadows into playing fields. When automobiles arrived, administrators responded to the pressure of new uses and new users by rearranging paths and adjusting the drives. City residents also enthusiastically greeted new park features, from statues and restaurants to children's rides and tennis courts, that distracted attention from the natural scenic effects. Through a vernacular process, the meaning of the park, proper or not, evolved. Still a “natural landscape,” it also became a social institution and city space.

Just as there are two traditions in the definition of Central Park as a park, its meaning as a public institution also has two dimensions: its political character as property and its cultural character as an open space. *Public*, in one sense, signifies property rights, government ownership and control of land removed from the real estate market. Public property, owned by the government, thus contrasts to private property, owned by individuals or corporations who can exclude others from their land. But public property also differs from common property, that is, land or resources to which all members of a community have unrestricted access. The right to control public property is vested in government officials who determine who has access to it and under what conditions. In a democracy, when land is owned by the “public,” government officials are thought to represent the interest of all citizens. In this sense, the people who organize and control a public park constitute the sovereign or political public. Yet the political process of selecting public officials is itself a matter of contest in which not all participants are equal.¹²

In a democratic and capitalist society, municipal politics revolve around

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Tocqueville's charge that Americans became involved in civic affairs more out of self-interest and greed than from pride or a sense of duty. "Why," asked one early park advocate, "should monarchy be allowed to do more . . . for its subjects than republican civic policy can achieve for a City of Sovereigns?"²⁵

Arguments for the necessity of fulfilling New York's destiny as a great world city intersected with concerns about the city's competitive position within its own emerging metropolitan area. To answer any doubts business readers might have about the relation between a public park and sustained economic growth, the editor of the *Commercial Advertiser* drew a practical analogy: "Many a tradesmen finds it profitable to expend money in extra fixtures and ornaments for his store. . . . to lay out money to bring in money is a common axiom of commerce." Many who lived in Manhattan were now seeking residence and recreation in Brooklyn and New Jersey, the editor explained: "It is to prevent this drawing away of our population and their money that we ought to be concerned."²⁶

In 1844 when Bryant first called for a park, the city was still recovering from the ravages of the 1837 Panic and no movement emerged to implement his proposal. The economic boom of the early 1850s directly fueled confidence that the city would be "immensely advantaged pecuniarily" as well as fulfilled in its metropolitan destiny by establishing a great park. But the march of the city's economy had produced grave public health problems that marred New York's reputation as an attractive place to visit, settle, or do business. Here, as in other industrial cities, the staggering mortality rate stemmed from contagion, accidents, malnutrition, exposure, contaminated water, and conditions of childbirth as well as from lung diseases associated with polluted air, but doctors believed it was the bad air of cities that caused disease. In the 1830s and 1840s health reformers in England, proclaiming that parks would serve as "lungs for the city," had launched campaigns for new public grounds as an antidote to the ills of industrial society. New York editors and politicians repeatedly invoked this phrase, urging the healthful benefits of parks for fresh air and exercise. Other measures (better housing and sanitation and more downtown public spaces, for example) would have more directly addressed health problems than a public park. Still, during muggy summer months in a fetid atmosphere of dust, coal smoke, and decaying manure and garbage, many naturally viewed fresh air and tree-filtered breezes as a primary source and certainly the symbol of physical well-being.²⁷

To most of the park's promoters, moreover, health represented as much a moral as a biological condition. Disease was associated with "dissipation," and nowhere did dissipation seem more threatening than in such popular male recreations as drinking, gambling, cockfighting, and boxing. A public park would provide a site for "healthy" and "manly" exercise. Bryant and his fellow editors stressed the contribution of parks "to the health . . . and to the morals of the community." In contrast to rough male sports or the temptations of "brightly

lighted streets," a *Courier and Enquirer* article said, a park would encourage family outings and inspire "home associations."²⁸

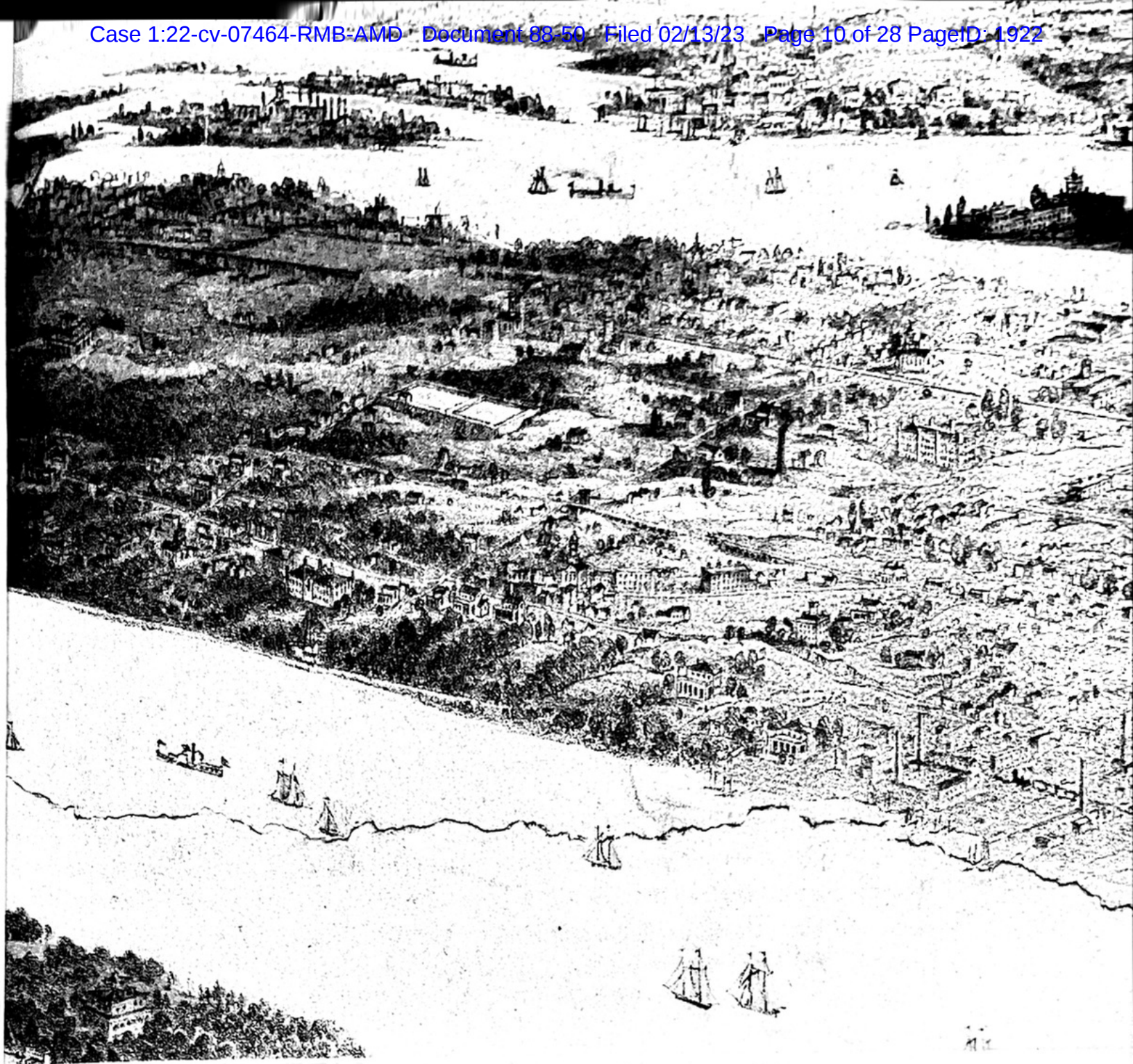
Park advocates believed that women and children (the two usually linked) would be the particular beneficiaries of a public park, "where the masses can enjoy perambulation, pure air, and exercise in summer." Although women were far from cloistered in nineteenth-century New York City, they had few opportunities for exercise and relaxation. In the 1840s writers had expressed alarm at the sickly condition of American women. Pointing to the burden of domestic duties as well as to constricted middle-class conventions of female dress, Catharine Beecher urged increased exercise; others charged that women's ill health reflected their general lack of opportunity for physical and mental development. A public park, advocates suggested, would "tempt fair pedestrians to . . . healthful and natural exercise." Assertions of its value to women as essentially moral beings also affirmed the essentially "moral" (and hence healthful) character of a public park.²⁹

"Good Morals and Good Order"

The appeal to health and virtue does not alone explain the rise of a movement to establish a large, landscaped park as a new *public* institution. Undeveloped lots and uptown resorts, as near to the city's center as the proposed park, could offer New Yorkers open space for fresh air and exercise. So could the extensive pleasure grounds of Hoboken's Elysian Fields, Brooklyn's Fort Green, and resorts on Long Island and Staten Island. Improved and cheaper mass transportation could make such resorts even more accessible. But editors agreed, only city government had the power to remove land from the rapacious Manhattan real estate market; only government could establish a park as a permanent and orderly environment for recreation.³⁰

Tocqueville linked Americans' impoverished civic culture to "conditions of equality" in a democracy, but wealthy New Yorkers worried as much about the conditions of inequality that fostered new kinds of social disorder. In 1849 riots had broken out when native-born mechanics protested the appearance of an elite-backed British actor at the downtown Astor Place Theater; the troops brought in to restore order fired into a crowd and killed twenty-two people. The following year, the city's nascent trade unions formed the New York Industrial Congress to coordinate their opposition to employers' degradation of the crafts. New waves of German and Irish immigrants, concentrated in crowded tenement districts, created their own cultural institutions, including beer gardens and corner saloons. The power of the city's merchants and bankers to dictate the terms of economic growth or maintain a unified cultural order was steadily being undermined.³¹

Older conceptions of republican benevolence held that wealthy citizens had



Manhattan north of 57th Street in 1854 included a mixture of country estates, asylums, and small villages such as Yorkville at East 85th Street. The rectangular Croton Reservoir later became part of Central Park, as did the Mount St. Vincent convent (far left) and the turreted New York State Arsenal.

instance, percentage of people owning land or numbers of people per dwelling), they were slightly better off. These figures undercut two other often-repeated, contradictory characterizations of uptown: that it was a slum or shantytown of twenty thousand squatters or that it was a bucolic watering place of the elite.²

Wealthy New Yorkers who built country estates along both river shores in upper Manhattan were never more than a small minority of the uptown population, though their social prominence—and the prominence of their dwellings—rendered them much more visible in both contemporary and historical accounts. In 1855 at least twenty-three hundred industrial workers in the “rural” districts toiled in sixty-four mostly small shops, including fourteen carriage- and coach-making establishments and various “nuisance industries” (soap, wax, paint, match, chemical, and bone-boiling plants). The uptown farms and gardens were also small; only the northernmost corners of the island retained

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intensive agriculture, with a total of perhaps a thousand acres actively cultivated for oats, potatoes, turnips, and other crops.³ Uptown Manhattan was, thus, less agricultural and more industrial than standard accounts suggest.

But the most distinctive uptown feature—the profusion of orphan asylums, hospitals, old age homes, and lunatic asylums—has rarely been noticed at all. A startling 15 percent of the population of the upper three wards (perhaps as many as nine thousand people) lived in such institutions, presumably because land was relatively cheap, because a “country” atmosphere was seen as rehabilitative, and because paupers, “lunatics,” and criminals were considered undesirable neighbors.⁴

At midcentury, then, uptown Manhattan was a “suburb” in the sense of a settlement outside the densest urban concentration. But it was the opposite of the modern sense of a suburb as a regulated residential environment. Instead, it was a jumble of small craft shops, large factories, tiny garden patches, two-hundred-acre farms, plank shanties, country estates, and institutional homes for the poor, criminal, and disabled. Between 1840 and 1855, the population above 40th Street multiplied five times, twice as fast as the rest of the city.

Many newer residents clustered in the areas made accessible by the emerging transportation system, which favored the East Side over the West Side. In 1834 regular runs of the New York and Harlem Railroad to 86th Street and Fourth Avenue attracted skilled American, German, and Irish workers and clerks to Yorkville, as did the opening of upper Third Avenue around the same time. Three years later, the railroad extended its range (and its impact) to Harlem; by the end of the decade it was carrying one million passengers per year just within Manhattan alone. On the West Side, the limited service of the Bloomingdale stagecoach line retarded West Side development. New transportation accelerated the exit of some older inhabitants. The Hudson River Railroad’s appearance on the far West Side in the late 1840s, observed longtime resident John Punnett Peters, “drove the occupants of those old homes to other regions.” But actually, the destruction of the West Side’s rural ambiance began in the previous decade with the laying of the Croton aqueduct, which cut through several of the old country estates and obtrusively ran pipes above ground between 84th and 113th streets.⁵

Disease also undermined the West Side elite’s gentry ideal. Wealthy New York merchant families had built uptown summer residences to escape the port’s yellow fever epidemics, but by the 1840s uptown no longer offered safe refuge from downtown diseases. In 1849 cholera appeared in the upper wards, hitting as one of its victims the wife of the minister of St. Michael’s Protestant Episcopal, the church of wealthy West Siders. Uptown residents such as Horace Greeley (who lost his only son to cholera) blamed the epidemic—inaccurately—on the arrival uptown of twenty thousand hogs that had been driven out of downtown by city police that summer. The intrusion of cholera as well as charitable institutions, railroad tracks, and aqueduct pipes prompted

Bloomingdale's elite to move their summer homes farther from the city—to be replaced, Peters writes, by “a poorer, if more numerous, class of residents.”⁶

With the city's outer wards undergoing rapid changes, some uptown landowners had begun to lobby for a large landscaped park within their district in the hope of shaping these powerful forces of development. A park, they thought, would eliminate the “nuisance” of workshops, hogpens, and asylums by replacing them with a new kind of suburb organized around private residences—the “garden, villa, and village settlement” that some uptown real estate investors promoted. “If the opening of the Park raises the actual or speculative value of lands in its vicinity,” the *Sun* pointed out in 1855, “it is certain that the poorer class of citizens will not settle them extensively when homesteads can be obtained cheaper elsewhere.” Uptown landowners saw the park both as a way of screening out new poor residents and their associated trades (an early form of zoning) and as a means of removing the existing poor population (an early form of urban renewal). “We want a park up town,” one citizen declared at a public hearing, “to remove the hog pens and filth that crowd people in the upper part of our city together,” but such uptown representatives as landowner and future mayor Daniel Tiemann privately admitted the concern was at least as much about a disagreeable urban population as about the disagreeable urban industries. West Siders, not coincidentally, advocated a park precisely in the territory with the largest concentration of poor uptown residents.⁷

In contemporary and historical accounts, those who lived in Central Park before it became Central Park have generally been unrepresented or misrepresented, either ignored or disparaged as a debased population of savages. Legislative discussions and public reports contain only indirect hints that anyone at all lived on proposed park land. Guides to the city that described East Side settlements like Yorkville and Carmanville made no mention of the equally large community of park dwellers. A few newspaper reporters evinced slightly more interest, none of it sympathetic. On March 5, 1856, a *Times* reporter drew on the recurrent New York motif of a dual city of “sunlight and shadows” to contrast the “human misery” in its “lowest and filthiest depths” within the park boundaries to “the luxury and elegance” that he expected to flourish when the finished park rivaled the Champs Élysées. He described the residents as “principally Irish families” living in “rickety . . . little one storie shanties . . . inhabited by four or five persons, not including the pig and the goats.” The *Evening Post* wrote that the duties of the new Central Park police would be “arduous,” since the park was the “scene of plunder and depredations,” “the headquarters of vagabonds and scoundrels of every description,” and the location of “gambling dens, the lowest type of drinking houses, and houses of every species of rascality.” An even more pervasive charge (really, an assumption) was that the park dwellers had stolen the land itself, that they were squatters.⁸

Most subsequent writers have drawn their information (often embellishing along the way) from a single paragraph written by the park's first engineer,

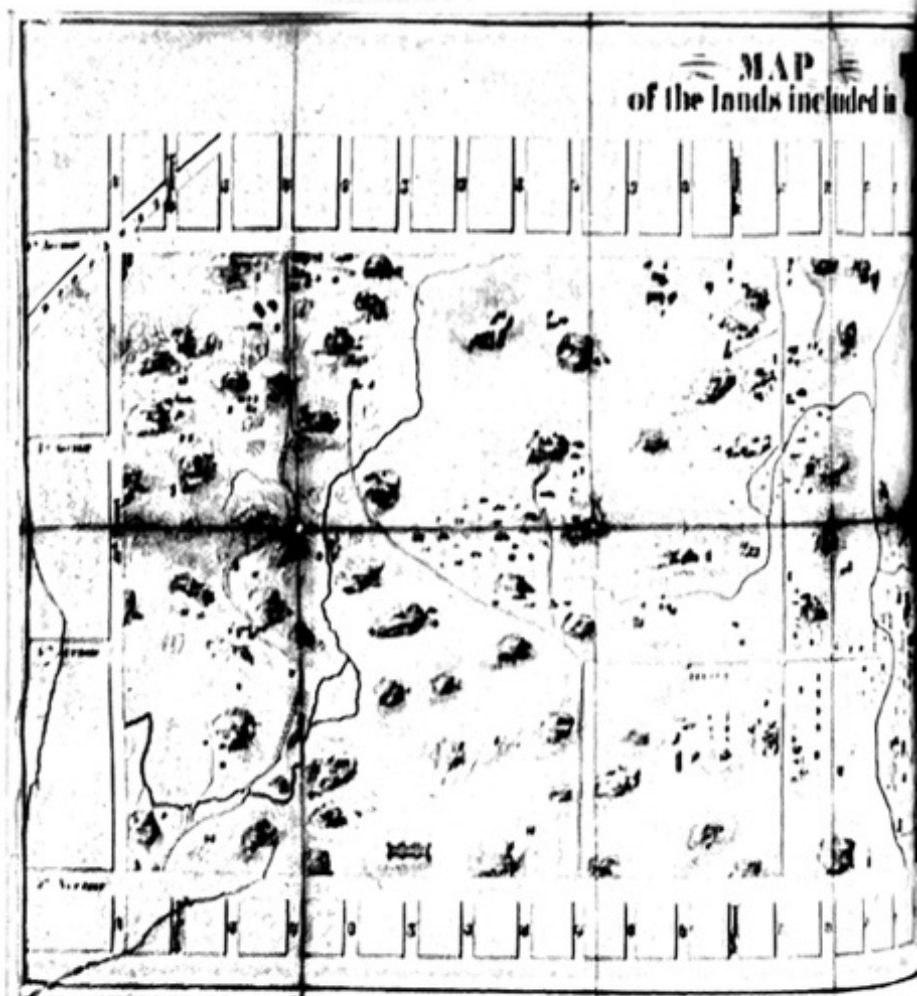
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Egbert Viele, who from the distance of forty years recalled the park as “the refuge of about five thousand squatters, dwelling in rude huts of their own construction, and living off the refuse of the city.” “These people who had thus overrun and occupied the territory were principally of foreign birth, with but very little knowledge of the English language, and with very little respect for the law. Like the ancient Gauls, they wanted land to live on, and they took it.”⁹

The “pre-parkites,” as one commentator called them, left no firsthand accounts to counter these scornful reports, but it is possible to piece together an alternative portrait of the roughly sixteen hundred residents from manuscript censuses, city directories, tax lists, land records, church registers, and the maps and petitions generated by the acquisition of the park land. More than 90 percent of those who lived on that land were immigrants—mostly Irish or German—or African Americans, compared to about half of the overall population of the city and also of uptown Manhattan. More than two-thirds of the adults worked at unskilled and service jobs—as laborers, gardeners, domestics, and the like—and most of the rest as tailors, carpenters, masons, or in other skilled trades. About one in ten ran a small business—a grocery or a butcher shop, for example.¹⁰

These aggregate figures challenge the existing portraits of the “pre-parkites” as criminals and vagabonds, but they hide much of the complex reality of life in the park. To uncover some of that reality, we need to look more closely at a particular park settlement known as Seneca Village.¹¹ The densely settled area between 82nd and 88th streets and Seventh and Eighth avenues had least three times as many people per block as the rest of the park. Atypical in its racial composition and its length of settlement, it deserves close scrutiny both because

Nearly 1,600 people lived in shanties and farmhouses scattered across the swampy and rocky terrain of the future park. Topographical map by Egbert Viele, 1856.



joined them in the next ten years. When asked in an 1857 court case about her familiarity with a tract of land in the upper park, Catherine Cogger replied: "I . . . have been looking at it for 20 years."³³

The area of the park under longest continuous settlement was probably the northeast corner, where the old Boston Post Road made its way between two rocky ridges. By the 1750s Jacob Dyckman had built a tavern on a hill in the vicinity of 105th Street and Fifth Avenue. It soon passed into the McGown family, which owned the tavern and the surrounding land for most of the next century. During the Revolutionary War, Hessian mercenaries occupied McGown's Pass, as it had come to be called, and in 1814 sixteen hundred militiamen guarded the area against a threatened British invasion. (The stone blockhouse at West 109th Street, the oldest building in the park today, is a surviving relic of the chain of fortifications built then.) In 1847 the Sisters of Charity of New York purchased a dilapidated frame house surrounded by pools of water on the site of the abandoned tavern; they took turns cooking their meals on a small coal stove and carried water from the nearest spring. "I have heard of poverty, but I never saw such a picture of it before," a young candidate for the order said to herself when she arrived in 1849. Within a few years, the sisters had constructed a flourishing religious community on what they called Mount St. Vincent. By the mid-1850s, their convent, with seventy sisters (half of them Irish-born), eleven Irish female servants, and nine Irish male employees, encompassed several substantial buildings including a laundry, a large brick chapel, a boarding academy for two hundred "young ladies," and a free school for fifty or sixty children from surrounding areas.³⁴

The religious buildings at McGown's Pass were not the only impressive structures within the proposed park boundaries. In 1848 the State of New York had erected the Arsenal on ten acres of land at 64th Street and Fifth Avenue. About fifteen blocks north the wealthy Wagstaff family maintained an old farmhouse at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street, one of the few paved streets in the area. And at around 68th and Sixth, the broker Peter B. Amory and his family of ten occupied the Amory family homestead.³⁵

On the western side of the park, a world away from the Amorys and the Wagstaffs, were the bone-boiling plants of George Moller and William Menck. Such "nuisance" industries were being driven out of lower Manhattan by ordinances, restrictive covenants, and public pressure. Leather dresser Benjamin Beaman, butcher Ludwig Sheff, and soap boiler Charles Lucke also faced fewer restrictions on their trades here than downtown. Some park dwellers helped to gather the thirty-four thousand bushels of animal bones that Moller and Menck required each year; others found the dollar-a-day wages offered at the plants attractive; and the rest were willing to tolerate (or at least lacked the resources to complain about) the noxious odors released when bones were boiled to produce fuel for sugar refining.³⁶ (The current occupant of the

gentlemen who hoped to instruct the public in manners and values. Central Park was open to the public, but not all behavior was equally welcome there.

Training the "Ignorant" How to Use a Park

Olmsted claimed credit for crafting the park's rules and enforcement procedures; in 1863 he informed Calvert Vaux that the "administration & management of the public introduction to and use of the park" was his "most valuable property" in the entire project. But Olmsted hardly shaped the rules for park use by himself. The board of commissioners had begun to consider park ordinances and policing before Olmsted joined the staff as superintendent. They did ask him to draft the regulations, and the first set of rules seems to have been devised by Olmsted in collaboration with his rival, Chief Engineer Egbert Viele. Olmsted himself held undisputed authority over the park for only a brief time between his appointment as architect-in-chief in May 1858 and Andrew Green's appointment as comptroller in October 1859. He and Vaux resigned as landscape architects in 1863 and they returned in that capacity two years later. Their connection to the park was interrupted again when Tammany Democrats captured the board from 1870 to 1871 but resumed in November 1871. A year later Olmsted and Vaux dissolved their partnership; Olmsted continued on the park in various superintending positions until 1877, and Vaux was a consulting landscape architect for some of this time. Park politics, however, constrained Olmsted's control of the park keepers and other administrative matters.²

Olmsted had set the tone for public use of Central Park in the first place back in the 1850s. "A large part of the people of New York," he told the commissioners shortly after he was hired as superintendent, "are ignorant of a park, properly so-called. They will need to be trained to the proper use of it, to be restrained in the abuse of it, and this can be best done gradually, even while the Park is yet in process of construction." From the start, he was determined to "train" the public to understand the difference between this park and other open spaces; he drew a particularly sharp line between public property (as government-owned property) and both unregulated private property and common property. "Visitors to the Park, should be led to feel as soon as possible," he declared, "that wide distinction exists between it and the general suburban country, in which it is the prevalent impression of a certain class that all trees, shrubs, fruit and flowers, are common property."³

Olmsted hit on the same theme fifteen months later just as the first ice skaters were venturing onto the frozen lake. The *New York Times* reprinted and expanded on his remarks on the importance of "instructing [people] in the proper use of the park." The "careless stupidity" Olmsted discovered among early park users came from the mistaken notion that a park was like a "wood," with which Americans associated "the idea of perfect liberty." The *Times* agreed

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The Park Proper: A promenade along the Lake.

with the need to distinguish parks from what it called “common spaces.” Central Park should not be treated like other public spaces in New York City, which it believed the municipal government had surrendered to “sharpers and rowdies”: “The treasury, the streets, the wharves, the City Hall, the urinal, the Court-rooms, ‘the [City Hall] Park’ have all been left to the care of the elements and the speculators; so that the mere fact of a piece of ground’s belonging to the public has become very naturally to be considered by the less intelligent classes . . . a license to commit nuisance on it. . . . Everyone must cease as soon as possible to associate [Central Park] in his mind with the dirty play-ground in front of the City Hall or Jones’ Wood.”⁴

Writing on the aesthetic motive of the Greensward plan in 1859, Olmsted had explained that the park “should present an aspect of spaciousness and tranquility . . . thereby affording the most agreeable contrast to the confinement, bustle, and monotonous street-division of the city. The Park should . . . as far as practicable, resemble a charming bit of rural landscape, such as, unless produced by art, is never found within the limits of a large town.”⁵ For Vaux this aesthetic goal had the intrinsic value of creating a beautiful public space that

perhaps the hard line taken in the first year succeeded in “training” visitors in proper park use, and violations diminished. Most likely, both were true.

*“Fast Trotting,” “Vulgar” Wagons, Gambling, Hawking,
and “Indecent Language”*

About half the rules focused on proper movement through the park, reflecting the emphasis of the Greensward plan on the visitors’ relationship to the scenery. Parkgoers were enjoined to enter only at the specified gateways, to use the paths (not the grass), and not to block the roads with horses or carriages. More than a hundred signs scattered across the park directed the movement of individuals through the landscape and to particular features.¹¹

Two other rules on movement affected who would use the park and how. The first concerned speed limits. In an effort to keep out sporting men and trotting matches, the Greensward plan had omitted long, straight drives; nonetheless, some newspapers worried that Central Park might turn into an “aldermanic commons for fast driving.” It was a realistic fear. In the 1850s harness racing was the nation’s leading spectator sport, according to sports historian Melvin Adelman, and New York City had at least seven trotting tracks. The *Irish News*, reflecting the cross-class nature of the sporting crowd, bemoaned the absence of “a raised, broad carriage and equestrian drive, round the park,” a “grand Excelsior Course” that the “great Equestrian Order of New York” could “race and rattle over, to their hearts’ content.” “Is there any amusement in the world,” it asked rhetorically, “which we prefer to . . . the whirling action of a gay nag throwing one mile behind her in three minutes?”¹²

Trotting matches and fast driving did not “stir the blood” of most park commissioners as it did the editors of the *Irish News*. The preliminary rules recommended to the board in September 1859 set the speed limit for carriages at five miles per hour and for horses at six. When the preliminary regulations were reported, one board member, the well-known fancier of fast horses August Belmont, moved to raise the speed limit for carriages to eight miles per hour and to eliminate all speed limits on the bridle paths. The board settled on a compromise of seven miles per hour for carriages and ten for saddle horses.¹³

Belmont had specifically crafted his proposal to “keep the fast-trotting men and other rowdies out” of the park. As his biographer explained, Belmont “liked to race horses on and off the racetracks,” but “he did not think the park would be an appropriate setting for anything that might be dangerous to wives and children.” Moreover, he was shifting his affections from harness racing to thoroughbred racing, then emerging as the favorite sport of wealthy New Yorkers. He regarded the heterogeneous sporting crowds that gathered to join in (and bet on) street harness races as an inappropriate constituency for Central Park.¹⁴

Despite speed limits and curved roads, the park initially proved "vastly attractive to the trotters," but soon regular arrests "made generally understood," as the *Atlantic Monthly* reported, "the law and customs of the park . . . restricting speed to a moderate rate." Between 1862 and 1863, speeding arrests dropped by two-thirds. The ban on fast driving was intended to ensure not only safety but also gentlemanly refinement. The *Herald* explained that "the rowdy habit of rapid driving" excluded a man from "the recognized list of gentlemen. . . . Any person thus demeaning himself upon a public fashionable promenade would be as indelibly stamped as ill-bred as if he were to be found running violently up and down a ball room in the midst of the dance."¹⁵ Just as women governed manners within the ballroom, they would also determine what constituted decorum on the park drives.

If the park was like a ball room, not only certain speeds could be judged "vulgar" (as the *Herald* put it) but certain types of vehicles as well. The thousands of commercial wagons owned by cartmen, undertakers, and other tradespeople that filled the city streets were, from the start, barred from the park. Regulations prohibited omnibuses and express wagons, as well as "any cart, dray, wagon, truck, or other vehicle carrying goods, merchandise, manure, soil, or other article." Olmsted's ban was intended to provide a noncommercial alternative to the city streets, but it had class implications. His "business regulation," explained one local newspaper, would prevent the "invasion of the Central Park by improper vehicles and improperly behaved persons" and would thus keep the park from being "deserted by the better classes of our population."¹⁶ At a stroke, Olmsted and the commission stopped butchers and bakers from joining bankers and brokers on the drives.

Trouble broke out almost immediately. Just a few months after the carriage drives opened, Olmsted reported that "frequent altercations take place between gatekeepers and persons endeavoring to enter the park with vehicles which gatekeepers judge should be excluded in obedience to the ordinances." "Some of our wagon-owning citizens," the *Times* noted around the same time, "have been already greatly aggrieved at finding themselves excluded from the 'people's park' by the 'people's policemen,' when they took their families there for a Sunday's drive in the respectable vehicles which do duty during the week in transporting legs of mutton, or cans of milk, or kegs of crackers, or boxes of candles from their shops to the customers' houses." These "sufferers . . . instantly break forth into indignant denunciations of the 'aristocracy,' and impassioned vindications of the 'rights of labor.'"¹⁷

Perceiving the implicit class bias in the park regulations, the *Leader* sarcastically praised them for setting out "what is *au fait* in a place of public resort" and wondered whether "our democratic citizens" would be "turned out of the enclosure as Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden." In prohibiting gambling, gaming, fortune-telling, hawking, peddling, or any other unlicensed commercial activity, the board had excluded not only the activities

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many wealthy New Yorkers found disagreeable but the equally disagreeable people who enjoyed them. Not coincidentally, the regulation against “threatening, abusive, or indecent language” followed the rules against peddling and riding in commercial wagons and preceded the rule on gambling and fortunetelling. In the mid-nineteenth century, respectable New Yorkers lumped these activities together as part of a lower-class street scene. Such prohibitions furthered Olmsted’s larger aspiration to set the park apart from other urban public spaces, to institute “the most agreeable contrast” to the “bustle” of the city.¹⁸

Other rules adopted in 1859 insisted on the distinction between the park and the woods or the commons. One regulation explicitly barred visitors from cutting, breaking, or defacing the trees, shrubs, and plants, and another prohibited “persons” from turning cattle, horses, goats, or swine into the park to graze. In effect, officials wanted to ensure that the park would not be “common,” in either sense of the word—nonexclusive or low and vulgar.

Olmsted’s early efforts to grapple with the problem of controlling public use of Central Park could not entirely anticipate the controversies that would emerge when it opened. Within a year of adopting the original park ordinances, for example, the board added rules forbidding swimming or fishing in the ponds, setting off fireworks, playing musical instruments, displaying any “flag, banner, target or transparency,” posting any bills or notices, or parading in military or target company or civic processions.¹⁹

From Olmsted’s perspective, however, the most persistent threat to the park came from any destruction of the turf. The original ordinances did not include the later infamous “keep off the grass” rule, but the first visitors did find placards advising: “For the Present Visitors are Prohibited to Tread on the Grass.” The seemingly temporary ban (justified by the newly seeded lawns) became permanent. By fall 1860 the first item on the poster that listed park regulations warned visitors “not to walk upon the grass; (except of the Commons).” Olmsted had decided to ban walking on the meadows but to permit exceptions by labeling some areas either temporarily or permanently as “commons,” thus ceding some public right of free access. Park officials allowed Saturday visitors to use the lawns, particularly the twenty-two-acre Green in the center of the park (originally called the Parade and later known as the Sheep Meadow). But as the *News* pointed out in 1860, such park regulations did not permit “the family of the poor artisan,” who could only visit on Sunday, to “carry the basket of cheap luxuries, a few apples or peaches, the home made pie and sandwiches . . . and sit and enjoy them under one of the trees of the only rural retreat open to him and his after the confining toils of the week.” Olmsted’s effort to preserve the lawns interfered as a practical matter with one of his own announced goals for the park: to provide the opportunity for poor families to enjoy as well as contemplate nature.²⁰

Adelman notes, of "the growing rowdyism . . . and especially gambling and partisanship" that was infecting baseball. "Indeed," comments another sports historian, "the revenues from liquor sales and gambling were the engines driving the sports boom of the 1850s."²⁵

New Yorkers organized new baseball clubs almost weekly in the late 1850s at the same time that the city swallowed up many of the available playing fields—the "out-lying common[s]," as a sporting paper called them. The ball clubs saw the new park as the answer to their dreams, but Olmsted and the board began to wonder whether their presence might prove, instead, to be a nightmare. In May 1861 the commission rejected the applications of baseball clubs for use of the park. "It is obviously impossible," it explained, to accommodate more than fifty ball clubs with more than fifty members each; "the space is not sufficient." Nor, the board explained in a later annual report, would it be possible "to satisfy the requirements of the numerous cricket, ball, and other adult clubs within the area of the Park, and at the same time preserve in the grounds an appearance that would be satisfactory to the much more numerous class that frequent the Park for the enjoyment of the refined and attractive features of its natural beauties." "The Park," the 1861 annual report had similarly noted, "has attractions to those that visit it, merely as a picture. . . . Whatever defaces or injures this picture makes it less attractive to the great mass of visitors, and should, for the general good, be excluded." Moreover, as the board later said, banning the ball clubs "effectually prevented" "match games and the objectionable features that have been the frequent attendant of these games."²⁶

If the park board would not allow baseball and cricket clubs, what was to be done with the playgrounds that had been in the plans from the start? After nine years of intensive discussion, probably under the influence of Andrew Green, a former president of the board of education and now comptroller of the park board, the commissioners restricted the playgrounds to schoolboys who could produce a certificate of good attendance and character from a teacher. And even these exemplary lads found the fields open to them only three days of the week. Working-class youths were largely excluded, since relatively few of them went beyond elementary school in this period.²⁷

A year after the commissioners opened the fields to schoolboys, they made a similar arrangement for girls. In 1867 they permitted schoolgirls to play croquet (whose popularity had boomed in the United States after the Civil War) on the lawns three afternoons each week. (Adults were permitted to play on the East Green.) Several contestants in the design competition, aware of the growing interest in physical fitness for women at midcentury, had proposed equipped fields for women's gymnastics, but these suggestions were not pursued by the commissioners, because they feared that equipped fields would detract from the park's scenic beauty.²⁸ The genteel and restrained game of croquet, whose movable equipment could be stored, fitted better with the designers' conceptions of a natural park. The park would be open to women's recreation, but only

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A PUBLIC MENAGERIE AND TWO PRIVATE MUSEUMS

In March 1856 financier August Belmont wrote from the Hague to his father-in-law, Commodore Matthew Perry, about the new park proposed for Manhattan. Three years earlier, Perry had opened Japanese ports to American ships, and Belmont had been dispatched by President Franklin Pierce to the Netherlands to negotiate the opening of Dutch ports in the East Indies. Now the two men were thinking about opening uptown Manhattan to elite residential development. Just as they looked to the national government to facilitate private trade ventures, so too they saw new opportunities for private initiative in the city's provision of a public park. "Your project of buying and building on the Central Park seems a very good one," Belmont told the commodore. But if the park was to protect such investment and attract "nice neighbors," it would have to be properly managed. Thus, two years before he joined the park board himself, Belmont was already speculating on what rules would be necessary to "keep the fast trotting men and other rowdies" out of Central Park and its surrounding neighborhoods.¹

Belmont's speculations to his father-in-law went beyond the question of how public officials should manage the park in the best interests of adjacent landowners to a new kind of private initiative: the creation of a private zoological and botanical garden within the public Central Park. If the city set aside thirty or forty acres, Belmont suggested, a state-chartered private company headed by "a few of our spirited citizens," might take control of the property and open a zoo, "only to subscribers." "A great many much smaller places than New York, such as Brussels, Antwerp, etc. have similar establishments without any aid of Government," Belmont noted, "and they have succeed[ed] very well." How much greater the chances for success if the city provided the land.²

Belmont's vision of a private zoo and botanical garden was not realized.

Instead, the Central Park Menagerie developed under public auspices and with a much more emphatically popular appeal than the exclusive institution Belmont had imagined. But two other important institutions emerged within Central Park in the last third of the nineteenth century that much more closely matched Belmont's model of private and elite control of public cultural institutions—the American Museum of Natural History on the West Side at 77th Street (in Manhattan Square, which had been annexed to Central Park in 1864) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the park facing Fifth Avenue near 81st Street. Although taxpayers provided the land and funds to build the museums, a private board of trustees controlled their management and use.

The divergent paths marked out by the zoo and the museums reflected the park's own changing relationship to its publics. In the 1860s when the zoo emerged on an ad hoc basis, the park's political public was composed of gentlemen like those on the original board and its cultural public was dominated by the gentlemen and gentlewomen of the carriage parade. By the 1870s and 1880s, as the two museums took shape and the zoo acquired its popular audience, the political and cultural publics were broader and more divided. The museums' elite founders viewed this democratization as a threat to their prerogatives and mission as patrons of art and science—particularly because they believed that party politics and popular crowds might undermine the cultural authority of their own institutions. Museum trustees accepted the need to deal with politicians to secure public funds, but they resisted opening their institutions to the same inclusively defined public that now infused the park. Their resistance was only partly successful. Dependence on public money ultimately forced the museum trustees to yield to the demands of working-class New Yorkers for greater access, particularly on Sundays.

The stake that new groups had developed in the park—and their definition of it as a common space—became most evident when a coalition united across party, class, and ethnic lines to block the introduction of a fourth cultural institution, a racetrack. A broadly constituted public defense of the park, rather than Belmont's private initiative, succeeded in keeping the “fast trotting men” out of Central Park.

The “Poor Man’s Monkeys”

The Greensward plan did not provide for a zoo, although other design competitors had favored the idea. In 1859 August Belmont, now back from Europe and on the park board, persuaded the commissioners to look into the operation of English and European zoological and botanical gardens. That year's annual report called for a zoo to be run by a private group that would pay rent and charge admission. Shortly after the beginning of the new year, some of the city's wealthiest gentlemen—including Belmont and four of the original

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signers of the Minturn petition for a park (as well as Frederick Law Olmsted)—organized the American Zoological and Botanical Society to plan the zoo. Within another few months, the state legislature authorized the board to set apart up to sixty acres in Central Park for a zoological and botanical garden to be run by the new society.³

As had been true of the initial movement to create a public park, prominent New York gentlemen impressed by European models led the way. Although no American cities had zoos at this time, many of the founders of the American Zoological and Botanical Society had probably visited the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and the London Zoological Garden. And like early advocates of the park, these gentlemen saw a zoological garden as a way to establish New York as “the acknowledged seat of wealth and moral power.”⁴

Just as some advocates viewed Central Park as the future rendezvous of the polite world, so some enthusiasts imagined a zoological garden as a place for their socializing—particularly if it were organized, as Belmont had urged, with special privileges for subscribers. The private society’s projected zoo would be open to the public but closed to the general public on Sundays. (London’s Zoological Garden admitted only subscribers on Sunday, “the fashionable day” to visit.) The *Herald* warned that “such class regulations” “in favor of the wealthy few” would not be tolerated in republican America, and the *Irish News* similarly declared the plan to restrict the zoo on Sundays “absurd” and “un-American.”⁵

Some early elite advocates also envisioned the zoo as a more republican institution that would educate ordinary citizens. Thus, the comptroller, Andrew Green, who had begun his career of public service as a school commissioner, repeatedly stressed the park’s educational mission. In 1862 the board’s annual report picked up on this theme, arguing that a zoo would serve as an auxiliary to the “great free educational system” of the city itself.⁶

The board acknowledged that a display of wild animals would have yet another appeal: “that such an establishment is demanded, both for *popular amusement* and instruction, there can be no question.”⁷ Most New Yorkers, who had never visited European capitals, had seen wild animals only in the traveling “menageries” (a term that generally connoted a less scientific enterprise than a “zoological garden”), which had been coming to the city since the early part of the century, or to the permanent menageries that had been a feature of New York’s popular entertainment in New York at least since the 1830s.

The *Irish News*, one of the most enthusiastic promoters of a zoo, summoned up the alternative appeal of the menagerie when it described the zoo as “a wilderness peopled with all sorts of *fera natura*—lions, tigers, elephants and jaguars—monkeys chattering in a row to please the nurses and children, and huge black bears performing gymnastic exercise on long poles to keep the cramp out of their legs.” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, speaking for its middle-class readers, offered a similar vision; it made fun of the exclusive, elite

vision of a zoological garden and declared: "We want some camels, an elephant or two, a deep-chested lion, and plenty of quaint bears, and funny monkeys—but bears especially—in the Central Park."⁸

When the zoological society's plans foundered during the Civil War, the state legislature authorized the park commission to establish a zoo under its own auspices in 1864. Olmsted had recommended in 1860 that the board set aside the relatively level land east of the rectangular Lower Reservoir (between 73rd and 86th streets along Fifth) that Viele had once envisioned as a parade ground and the Greensward plan had designated for a playground. But by 1864 Olmsted and Vaux were insistently opposed to a zoo in the main body of the park, and they drew up a plan to put one at Manhattan Square (the tract of land between 77th and 81st streets and Eighth and Ninth avenues, later the site of the American Museum of Natural History), which the 1864 legislation annexed to Central Park. Delays in grading the surrounding streets slowed progress, and at the end of 1869, only preliminary excavations and a portion of the foundation wall were completed.⁹

As park officials argued about management, location, and organization, a zoo had actually emerged under their noses. Almost from the opening, people had been making gifts to the board, including a strange assortment of historical relics (shells fired at Fort Sumter, for example), art works (a large collection of plaster casts from the late sculptor Thomas Crawford, which were ultimately displayed in the old Mount St. Vincent Chapel), and especially live animals. Olmsted recalled later that most of the first animals received were "pets of children who had died" or left town. If true, New York children kept a rather weird collection of pets in the 1860s, since among the animals presented to the park were a deer, a goose, an alligator, a peacock, a porcupine, a pelican, a prairie wolf, a silver gray fox, and a boa constrictor. By the summer of 1863, the board had set up a wire-enclosed space near the Mall for some of these animals. There, a disabled Civil War veteran looked after five or six deer, three bald eagles, two yellow-tufted cockatoos, an antlered buck, a raccoon, and three monkeys.¹⁰

Mounting donations—more than 250 animals arrived in 1864 and 1865 alone—gradually built the zoo. In 1865 General William T. Sherman contributed three African Cape buffaloes he had picked up in his march through Georgia. That same year, the commissioners placed the collection in more permanent quarters at the Arsenal. In warm weather larger animals—for example, Sherman's buffaloes—grazed out behind the Arsenal, tied to a willow tree. In 1868 the park authorities fenced in an area east of the Lower Reservoir (the present site of the Metropolitan Museum) for a deer park. Despite continuing complaints about the need for better quarters, the zoo emerged as one of the park's most popular attractions, especially after an 1865 fire destroyed the "happy family" animal exhibit run by America's best-known entertainment impresario, P. T. Barnum, at his American Museum. Such upper-class New

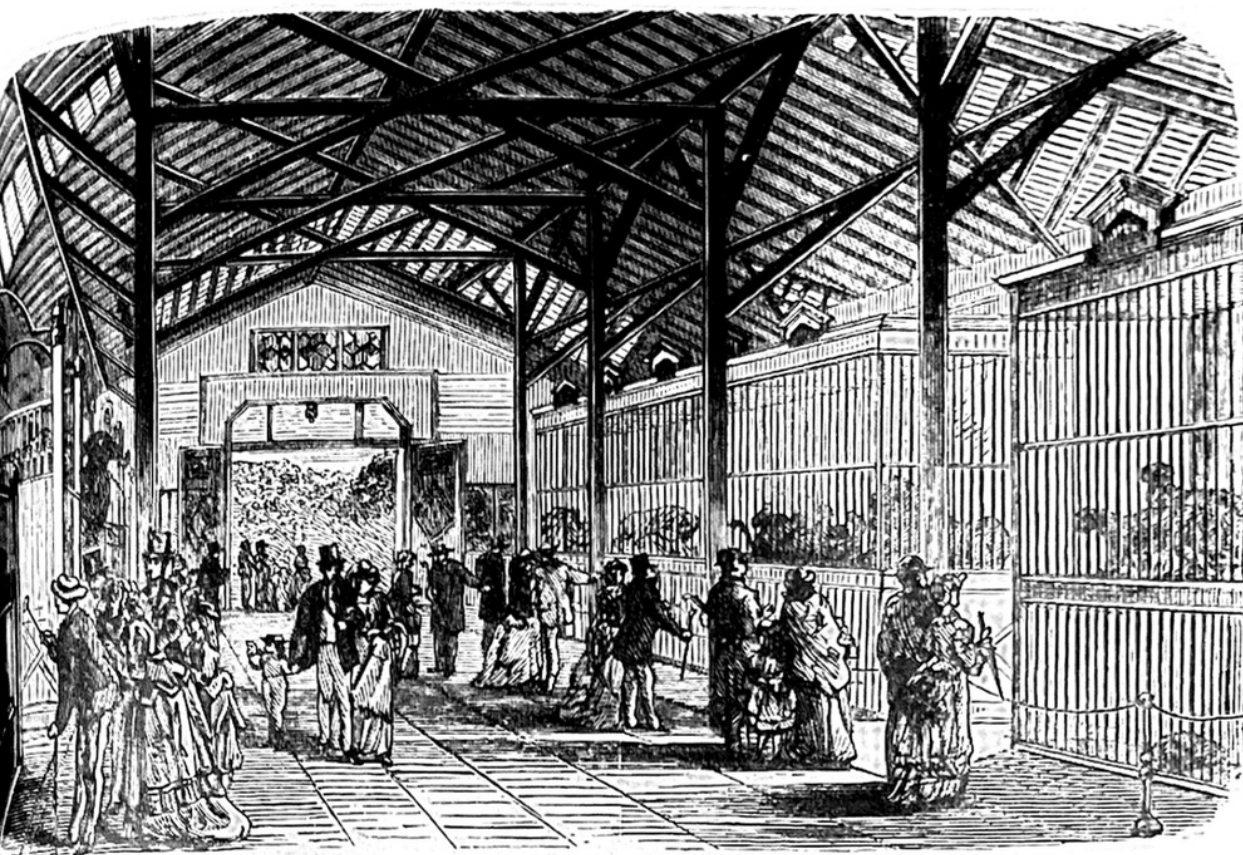
Yorkers as George Templeton Strong griped that it “amount[ed] to little” and was arranged “without any system” but conceded that it received “much attention from visitors.”¹¹

With the ascension of the Sweeny park board in 1870, the zoo received even more attention from park administrators. A few months after taking office, the new commissioners turned over the Arsenal interior to park offices and a burgeoning natural history collection and moved the animals into five newly constructed buildings in the Arsenal yard. The parks department then began to buy animals rather than just take whatever was left at its doorstep. Commissioner Henry Hilton, reported the *Times* in July 1871, “has purchased eight well-trained ‘low comedian’ monkeys.” These “comical ‘Darwinian links’ will occupy two splendid cages.” Even Olmsted, who had very little good to say about the accomplishments of the Sweeny board, admitted that the new zoo buildings were “the best of the class on the continent.”¹²

Although the Sweeny commissioners did not record their motives for renovating and expanding the zoo, such attractions (and the jobs created by the new construction) were popular among the constituents who had swept the Democrats into office. Meanwhile, the Tammany board proposed shifting the permanent site of the zoo from Manhattan Square to the North Meadow. Olmsted and Vaux denounced the idea as a “fatal mistake” that would destroy “the only broad space of quiet rural ground on the island which has been left undisturbed by artificial objects,” but the board had little sympathy for the designers’ vision of a pastoral park. For the next three decades designers and politicians would debate zoo sites (Olmsted later counted twelve different unsuccessful proposals), and meanwhile visitors streamed in to visit the “temporary” menagerie.¹³

The renovation of the menagerie and the Arsenal museum in 1870 (and the opening of the Carousel) together provide the best explanation for the dramatic jump in park attendance around that time. In 1869 about one-quarter of the park’s pedestrian visitors came into the park through the Fifth Avenue gates nearest the zoo; just two years later close to half were entering there. By 1873, according to the menagerie director William Conklin, the zoo attracted more than two and a half million visitors, about one-quarter of all those who came to the park. And by 1888 Conklin claimed that “nine out of every ten persons who enter the Park by the lower entrances wend their way to the menagerie.” The zoo was particularly popular on Sundays, when working-class New Yorkers, especially children, flocked to see the exotic animals.¹⁴ It brought new crowds to the park precisely because it was one of the few *free* attractions to which working-class families could bring their children.

As a popular cultural institution, the zoo subverted the genteel conception of Central Park as an arena of bourgeois (and primarily adult) decorum and order. Critics derided the “ill-assorted” menagerie, claiming that it attracted a “rabble of curiosity seekers” and was “useless” for education. The line between the zoo



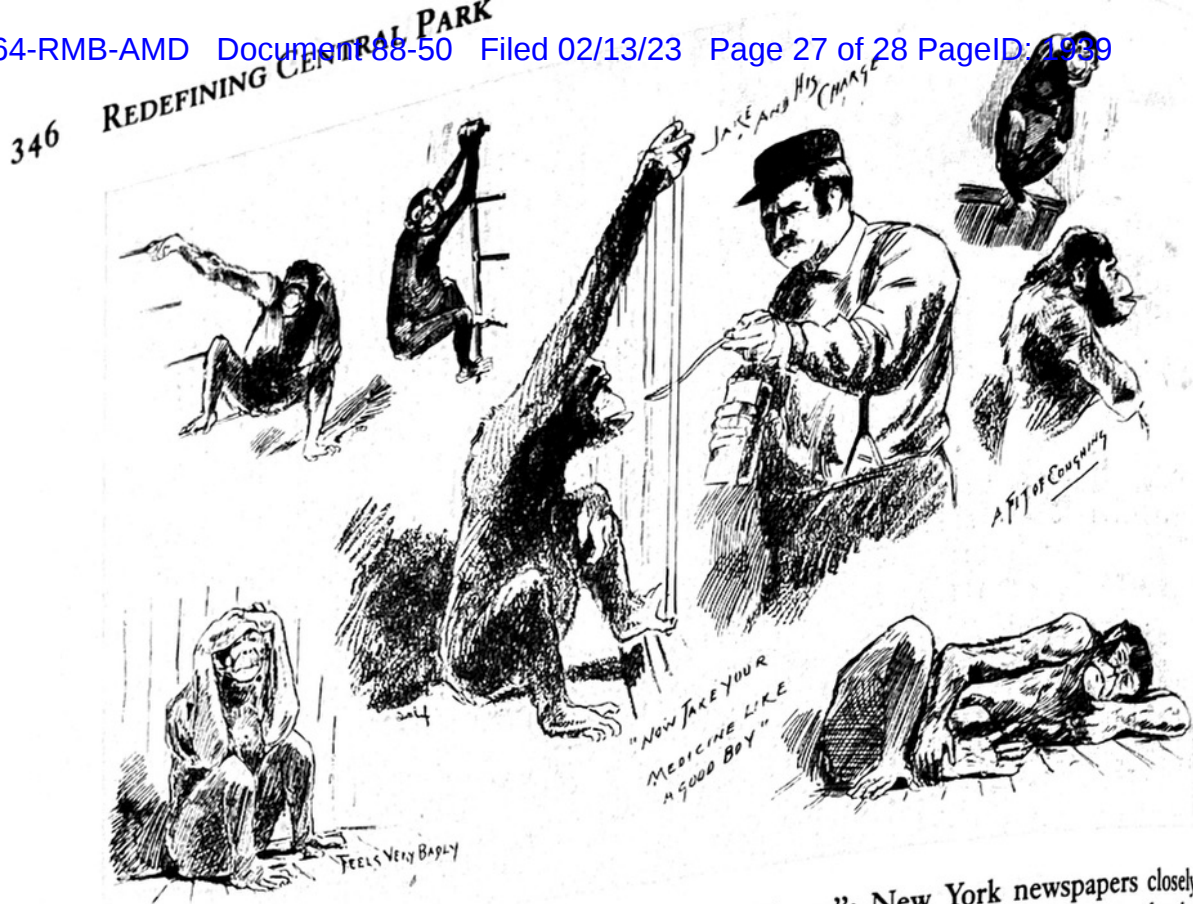
Menagerie, Central Park

In 1870 the Sweeny park board built permanent quarters for the zoo west of the Arsenal.

and commercially organized amusement centers was increasingly blurred as the visitors and animals shuttled back and forth between them. Barnum developed an especially close relationship with the zoo, for in the cold months of the year, he and other circus operators quartered their animals there. In turn, Barnum used the zoo's collection as a resource for his commercial operations. When he needed an eagle for his Centennial Show, he borrowed one from the Central Park.¹⁵

Popular newspapers also had a reciprocal relationship with the zoo. They provided unusually detailed coverage of the animals in order to sell newspapers and entertain their readers. Readers would turn out to look at the new kangaroos or see how much "Murphy, the Hippo" had grown. On November 9, 1874, the *Herald* devoted its entire front page to a story that described in grisly detail an escape of the animals. The sensational hoax threw many New Yorkers into a panic. Even the *Herald's* war correspondent showed up at the zoo with two big navy revolvers, ready to fight the rampaging animals. The response showed how centrally the zoo had come to figure in the popular imagination.¹⁶

Monkeys held a particular fascination for crowds in an era in which Darwin's theories were being popularized. The menagerie's peak as a center of popular amusement probably came in the mid-1880s after it acquired a chimpanzee brought back from Africa by the American consul to Liberia. Overflow crowds packed the Monkey House to get a look at the first chimp exhibited in



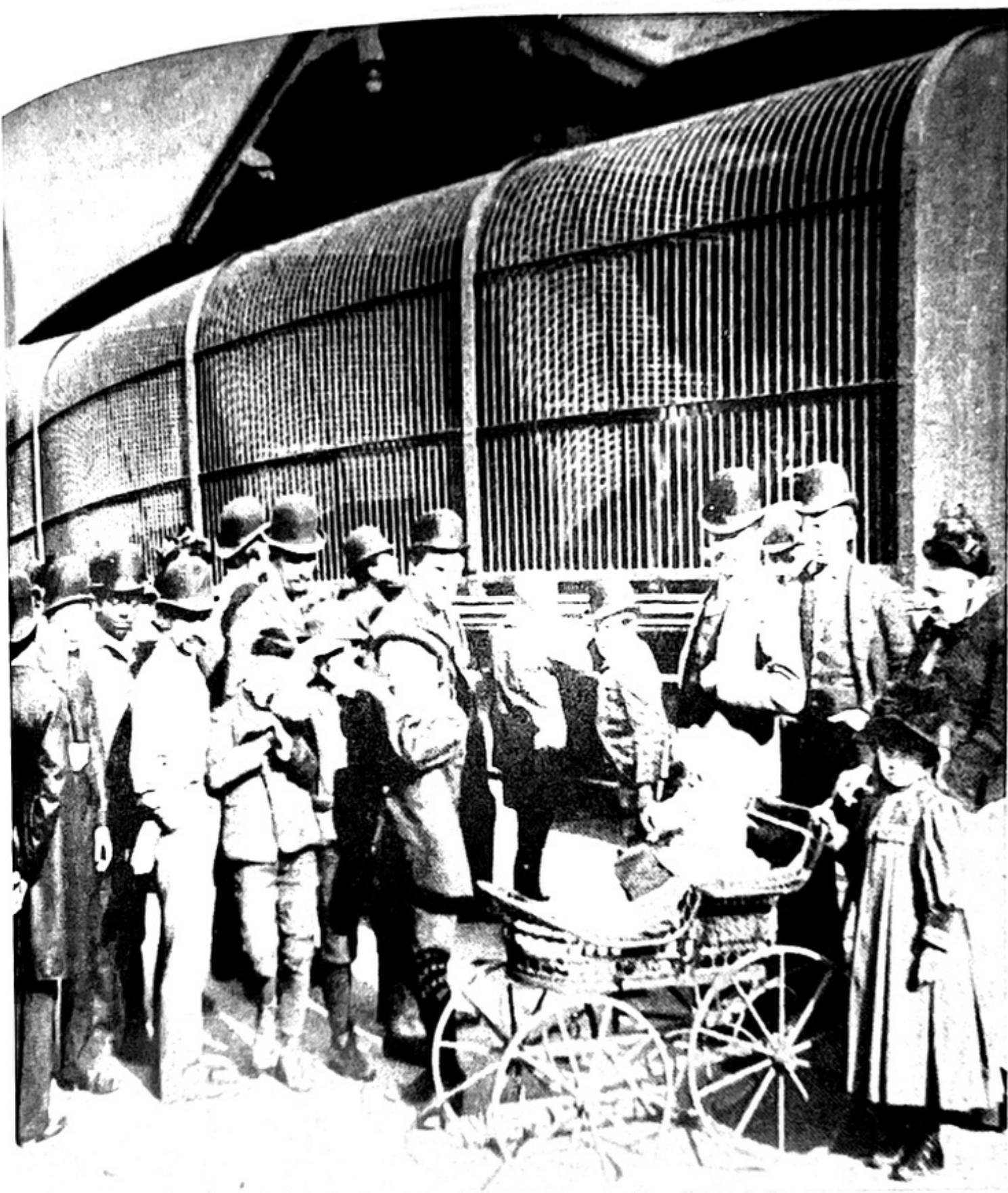
"The Late Mr. Crowley of Central Park in His Last Illness": New York newspapers closely followed the life and death of the first chimpanzee exhibited in the United States, who was also the park's most famous celebrity.

the United States. Former president Ulysses S. Grant and dozens of photographers and artists showed up. Controversy flared over whether the name given to the chimp—Mike Crowley—was an insult to the Irish, and Irish-American organizations sent protest delegations to the parks department. When "Mr. Crowley" took ill, the zoo had to issue regular bulletins about his condition, which were printed daily in the newspapers. Letters poured in offering sympathy and popular health remedies. Faith healers showed up to pray for the chimp, and prohibitionists protested against the use of ardent spirits as a cure. After he recovered, a paperback book (price: thirty cents) recounted the chimp's life and times.¹⁷

Such a popular sensation could not escape the notice of the aging Barnum, who desperately wanted the chimp as a leading attraction of his Greatest Show on Earth. When the park board rejected his initial bid of five thousand dollars, he offered to throw in the largest elephant in his collection, which he valued at ten thousand. "All these propositions being declined," Mr. Crowley's biographer reported, "the great showman departed, with some vexation on his usually cheerful features."¹⁸

That the zoo had a bigger drawing card than Barnum no doubt pleased park officials, but for Olmsted such popular attractions had nothing to do with the Greensward plan. Asked by the board in 1890 to review the still-controversial question of the best location for the zoo, Olmsted readily conceded that there was no "portion of the Park that is more crowded, or in which the people, and

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In 1873 more than 2.5 million people (roughly one-fourth of all parkgoers) visited the Central Park Menagerie.

especially the children find more amusement." But "the leading purpose of the Park is not the amusement of the People," particularly the sort of amusement provided by a menagerie, a theater, a "Punch and Judy performance," or a "negro minstrel show." Quite the contrary, the "proper and only justifying purpose of so large a park" was to provide "great numbers of people living in a compactly built town . . . with an opportunity to get quickly out of the scenery of buildings, streets and yards into scenery to be formed with a view of supplying a refreshing contrast with it."¹⁹

By 1890 Olmsted's objection to the menagerie reflected his increasingly adamant insistence that Central Park should provide natural scenery and little else. Most New Yorkers who joined Olmsted in his opposition, however, wanted the zoo moved because it was the wrong zoo in the wrong spot rather than